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AUTHOR Sticht, Thomas G.
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ABSTRACT

In the United States and many other nations, adult literacy students are marginalized. To serve the educational needs of these adults, governments have established an educational system that is marginalized among education systems. In California, the adult literacy education system is marginalized in the following ways: it is a noncredit system between the K-12 education and college systems; it receives much less funds per full-time equivalent student; 80-90 percent of its teachers work part time; it is clearly of lower social standing; and it lacks legislative attention. There are reasons to argue that adult literacy education ought to occupy a central position in national reform activities. It is central to achievement of the eight national education goals of the National Governors' Association endorsed by the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government. Four reasons why the adult literacy education system should move from the margins to the mainstream of educational policies are as follows: better educated adults produce better educated children, demand and get better schooling for children, provide better communities for learning, and are more productive for society. Government agencies should consider the multiplier effects that may be possible for investments in adult literacy education. Investment in adult education makes the schools and community more productive, helps in achieving National Educational Goals, and promotes democracy and good citizenship. (Contains 10 references.) (YLB)

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Division of Adult Education and Literacy
Office of Vocational and Adult Education
U.S. Department of Education
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Moving Adult Literacy Education From the Margins to the Mainstream of Educational Policy and Practice

Thomas G. Sticht
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> *Mar•gin•al•ize (mär2jú-nú-lhz1) v. tr. mar•gin•al•ized mar•gin•al•iz•ing mar•gin•al•iz•es 1. To relegate or confine to a lower or outer limit or edge, as of social standing. --American Heritage Dictionary*

In the United States, and in many other nations, adult literacy education students, including those studying English as a second language (ESL), are marginalized. As a group they tend to earn less than the medium incomes of other, better educated adults, they are typically confined largely to an inner city area with lower education, large numbers are below the national standards for literacy, there are higher than average crime rates, unemployment rates, and higher rates of other social problems (drug usage, teenage pregnancy, etc.). The neighborhoods are those recognized by locals as of lower social standing.

To serve the educational needs of these adults, governments have established an educational system which, like the adults it is meant to serve, is marginalized among education systems. In California, where research by the San Diego Consortium for Workforce Education and Lifelong Learning (CWELL) has been conducted, and forms the basis for most of my comments here, the adult literacy education system is marginalized in the sense that it is a non-credit educational system in between the K-12 educational system and the college system. It receives much less funds per full time equivalent student than do these other educational systems and eighty to ninety percent of its teachers work part-time without benefits.

The adult literacy education system is also clearly of lower social standing. This shows itself dramatically by the fact that there is practically no coverage of the system by the news media. While the K-12 and college systems are the subject of literally hundreds of news stories per year in the local newspapers, television, and radio, there are few, if any, stories about the adult literacy education system. Occasionally, perhaps on or near the yearly International Literacy Day, the media will run a human interest story about an adult who received literacy tutoring, or advertise a literacy day event. But one looks back over the last five years of the CWELL project in vain for the types of investigative news stories that provide citizen oversight of the K-12 and college systems.

The marginalization of the adult literacy education system shows itself even at the state level where there has been little legislative concern for the adult literacy education system since the 1990 California Workforce Literacy Task Force's report. Since then, while tens of millions of dollars have been spent and more are allocated just to develop assessment systems for the K-12 system, there have been no statewide evaluation studies of the adult literacy education system by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction's office, no in-

depth studies by the Legislature nor any interest by the Governor's office in this system that spends hundreds of milliions of taxpayer's dollars each year.

From the lack of attention to it, it is easy to get the impression that few people know about or care about the adult literacy education system. The few that do care about it are more than likely the adult educators themselves and the adult students that have come into contact with the system.

The Centrality of Adult Literacy Education
to the Achievement of the National Education Goals

In contrast to the *marginalization* of the adult literacy education system, there are actually reasons to argue that adult literacy education ought to occupy a *central* position in national education reform activities. As the following indicates, adult literacy education is central to the achievement of the eight national education goals of the National Governor's Association supported by legislation endorsed by both the Executive and Legislative branches of the U. S. government (National Education Goals Panel, 1997).

Goal 6 of the National Education Goals listed in the GOALS 2000 legislation is called "Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning." It states that every American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. While Goal 6 is the only goal that focuses directly upon adults, most of the other seven goals also rest largely upon success in achieving Goal 6 if they are to be achieved.

Goal 1, "School Readiness," calls for all children in America to start school ready to learn.
The importance of the children's parent's literacy skills, education and life circumstances in achieving this goal was recently reiterated in the National Academy of Sciences report, "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children" (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The Executive Summary for the report states:

> Reducing the number of children who enter school with inadequate literacy-related knowledge and skill is an important primary step toward preventing reading difficulties... Children from poor neighborhoods, children with limited proficiency in English, children with hearing impairments, children with preschool language impairments, and children whose parents had difficulty learning to read are particularly at risk of arriving at school with weaknesses in these areas and hence of falling behind from the outset.

Clearly the National Academy of Sciences report places direct responsibility upon youth and adults, both parents and parents-to-be to provide proper planning for the conception of children, the prenatal care of babies, and the post-natal, preschool care and stimulation that produces children with the oral language skills and experience with literate environments that will prepare them to enter the culture of the school ready to learn. Undereducated youth and adults whose literacy skills are low will likely find it difficult to contribute to the achievement of Goal 1 unless they achieve Goal 6 - literacy.

Goal 2 calls for the high school graduation rate to increase to a least 90 percent, while Goals 3 and 5 call for greater achievement in learning by students across the grades, with an emphasis upon science and mathematics. Goal 8 calls for greater parental participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.

All these goals pre-suppose, in the general case, the literate youth and adults called for in Goal 6. The recognition that the education of youth and adults is not an incidental, marginal activity, but rather the key to accomplishing the remaining education goals offers a challenge for adult literacy education in the new millennium. It places greater responsibility upon policy makers to increase their attention to and find resources for the creation of a system of adult literacy education that is not a marginalized, piecemeal collection of services but is rather an integral component of the educational commitment of the nation. It places further responsibility upon adult literacy educators to develop effective programs that produce demonstrable, sustainable, useful gains in literacy and a commitment by adult students to continue their learning beyond the classroom walls.

The Multiplier Effects of Adult Literacy Education

Here are four reasons why the adult literacy education system should move from the margins to the mainstream of our educational policies.

Better Educated Adults Produce Better Educated Children. Better educated parents send children to school better prepared to learn, with higher levels of language skills, knowledge about books, pencils and other literacy tools needed for school and life. Better educated mothers have healthier babies, smaller families, children better prepared to start school, and children who stay in school and learn more (Sticht & McDonald, 1989).

Sticht & McDonald (1990) summarize research on the effects of mothers' education on children and their educational development at various developmental stages, beginning with the role of education on the initial propensity to have children. Girls' and mothers' education is important in determining fertility rates, that is, just how many children there will be in the household. The latter, in turn, is related to the preschool cognitive development of children and their subsequent achievement in school.

Given that conception and motherhood have occurred, the next question concerns the pre- and postnatal conditions that permit the birth of healthy children who will survive. Mortality rates and the health of young, preschool children determine how many children will be available to benefit from primary education. Mothers' education level is a major factor in ensuring high survival rates and healthier children with whom the schools can work.

More highly educated mothers not only produce healthier preschool children, they also produce children who are better prepared with knowledge, oral language and literacy skills upon entry into primary schooling. There is no denying the importance of preschool parent and child interaction, particularly in activities such as reading together, for the

development of cognitive, oral language, and preschool literacy skills that will later serve the child well in the schools.

Finally, parents', and especially mothers' education is strongly related to children's tendency to stay in school and to achieve at higher levels. Mothers' education level is particularly important for students in the later grades of school, where more difficult assignments may make more demands on the mother's knowledge for help with homework, and where the mother's knowledge of and willingness to become involved in the schools on behalf of her children may make the difference between children's school success or failure. All of these positive effects of women's education offer compelling arguments for greatly expanding efforts to include women in literacy and adult education programs.

Better Educated Adults Demand and Get Better Schooling for Children. Wider Opportunities for Women in Washington, DC found that mothers in women's education programs, most of whom were on welfare, reported that at the end of their education program they spent more time with their children talking about school, helping them with their homework, taking them to the library, and reading to them. They also said their children attended school more, and showed improvements in their school grades, test scores, and reading. In visits to the homes of some of these mothers their children confirmed what their mothers had reported. Children said things like, "I do my homework just like Mommy!"or "she reads him and his sisters stories" (Van Fossen & Sticht, 1991).

Better educated adults provide better communities for learning. AC Rochester, a supplier of components for General Motors automobile manufacturing in New York State, was losing business and was in fear of closing, putting thousands of workers out of jobs. In response, management, labor union members, and educators got together, and provided adult education programs for employees. They provided full time education with full pay to over two hundred employees for up to ten months. These changes in workforce education permitted the intro-duction of new management and production techniques. In turn, these changes helped bring in several new contracts, including a billion dollar contract with Russia. This increased the local tax base for community services, including better public education (Rosow & Zager, 1992).

Better educated adults are more productive for society. In recent years, due primarily to the now defunct National Workplace Literacy Program (NWLP), a body of research has

emerged on workplace literacy programs that integrate English as a second language (ESL) or other basic skills education with job skills training. The general results of this body of research is that such programs may contribute not only to improving adults' job-related literacy and numeracy skills, but also to improved productivity on the job, increased reading to children at home, thereby better preparing them for and helping them in school, increased use of language and literacy skills in the community, and the decision to pursue further education (Hollenbach, 1993).

In one study, ten manufacturing companies in the area of Chicago, USA, making products ranging from hydraulic valves to bubble gum, provided basic English language, reading and mathematics education for over 700 employees. In evaluation studies conducted in six of the companies, many supervisors reported that the programs had a variety of positive effects on organizational effectiveness, including increased productivity, employees became easier to train, their job performance, safety, and communication improved, many became more promotable, and a third of them said their companies would continue the programs (Sticht, 1994, pp. 6-9).

The majority of the employees themselves said that the workplace literacy programs had helped them not only at work, but also at home, where they read more to children or grandchildren and helped them with mathematics homework, and in the community, where they spoke up more in grocery stores to guard against overcharges, they got driver's licenses, and participated in school and other community activities that contributed to a safer and sounder community, and most were encouraged to seek further education Through all these changes in behavior, which resulted from a very brief, focused set of adult literacy education programs, the workplace literacy programs contributed to a number of the National Education Goals concerned with improving the K-12 system.

The Need to Mainstream the Adult Literacy Education System

The research summarized above provides evidence to suggest that "double duty dollars" may be obtained through the intergenerational transfer of educational benefits from parents to their children. When we provide adults with education and training, we invest in one generation, but we get a return on investment in two generations. We are not helping just one person, but an entire family.

Research on workforce education and workplace literacy programs provides evidence that by integrating academic and jobs skills training, we can reduce the amount of time needed to both educate and train adults in a job field, they can more quickly enter into employment and more rapidly return the investment in their training through tax revenues.

We can teach those on welfare job skills and parenting skills by integrating these content areas with basic skills instruction, rather than thinking that one has to first get the basic skills and then use them to learn job or parenting skills. Making such learning sequential adds to education and training time and costs, and keeps adults out of the productive workforce longer. Greater returns to education and training dollars can be obtained by changing existing regulations to require the integration of basic skills, job training, and parenting education, much as the U. S. Department of Education's National Workplace Literacy Program (NWLP) regulations called for teaching basic skills in the context of work skills.

By investing in the literacy education of adults, we are not just getting people *off* welfare roles, we are helping to *keep them off* welfare in the future if they find themselves back in

the job market again. Importantly, the research on workplace literacy programs reviewed above provides evidence that investments in adult literacy education improves productivity at work *today*, while improving the productivity of the future workforce by reforming the K-12 schools will take decades.

Government agencies should consider the *multiplier effects* that may be possible for investments in adult literacy education. By investing in the education of adults, we make the schools more productive and the community more productive. We help in the achievement of all of the National Education Goals. We promote democracy and good citizenship. And we do it all today, without having to wait 20 years for reform of the preschool and K-12 system to produce returns on investment.

Given the evidence for the multiplier effects of adult literacy education, it seems imperative that more attention be given to this system. It is time for this critical educational activity to move from the margins to the mainstream of national educational systems.

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